

Jesus' Parables

This morning I want to talk to you about parables—specifically Jesus' parables. Believe it or not, almost one third of Jesus' teachings were in parables. So if this is the case, all of us should be able to properly interpret His parables. So let's begin with some generalities:

I. Observations concerning parables

A. Description of parables

Parables are a unique form of communication that capture our attention. They can't be compared to any other form of writing. But with their attention-getting-nature, most people struggle with a proper interpretation of parables, mainly because they are unaware of the special rules needed to properly interpret them. Sadly, although parables should greatly benefit our spiritual growth, they are some of the most abused and misinterpreted portions of Scripture.

B. Definition and description of a parable

So what is a parable? Simply put, a parable is a comparison. Our English word "parable" is taken from the Greek word παραβαλλω, which is a compound word from παρα, meaning "beside" or "alongside" and βαλλω, meaning "to cast" or "to throw". A parable, then, is something "thrown alongside" something else.

C. The general purpose of parables

The purpose of parables is to heighten and set forth ideas and moral truths in

attractive and memorable forms. If we give moral truths in our normal use of conversation or language, they will likely be forgotten or leave little impression on our minds. But when a parable is used to instruct us, its memory is striking and vivid.

For example, Nathan's parable to David about the rich man who stole his poor neighbor's sheep to feed a traveler was a memorable parable. Why? Because it was striking and vivid, making it much more effective than if he would have simply said, "David, you stole your neighbor's wife for your own pleasure." So in the same way, Jesus used parables to vividly impress people's minds with the truth that would have much more been easily forgotten than if He had simply used normal language.

D. Elements of parables

1. Parables portray common occurrences

Parables always deal with circumstances in common everyday life thrown alongside a spiritual truth to be learned. A parable is a known thing, event, or custom that everyone hearing them can identify with. Jesus' parables are about farming, marriages, kings, feasts, household relationships, business arrangements, and customs.

2. Parables are easily relatable, possible, and believable

Parables are familiar and ordinary to the audience they are addressed to. No explanation of a parable is necessary—everyone knows what the speaker is talking about. The circumstance conveyed in parables is also possible and believable. A parable's imagery is always true to the facts and experiences of everyday human life. Parables are not like fables which talk of imaginary things like talking birds and animals and trees and mountains.

3. Parables make the hearer's think

Although parables themselves need no explanation, they make us think in order to understand their meaning. A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, but it leaves our mind in doubt to think about its meaning and application to our lives.

4. Parables transfer from the known to the unknown

Unlike fables a parable makes no attempt to transfer something from an unknown realm to another unknown realm as in the case of Alice in Wonderland. The transfer of truth in a parable is always from a known realm to the unknown realm, or a well-known earthly event, circumstance, or custom to an unknown spiritual truth.

5. Parables mainly consist of three parts

a. The occasion and circumstance

This first element is what prompts a parable. Jesus did not just speak in parables with no reason behind them. There was always an occasion or circumstance or context that prompted Him to speak in a parable.

b. The usual use of similes

This is the introductory part of any parable. It is usually expressed and is what makes the parable a figure of speech needing to be interpreted. An example of this is many of Jesus' parables beginning with, "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ."

c. The spiritual lesson

This is never stated and is always left for the hearer to determine. It is always the main reason why Jesus spoke in parables. Without the spiritual lesson there is no meaning to the parable.

II. Interpreting parables

There are many rules for interpreting Jesus' parables, but we will only look at one this morning and then interpret one of His most memorable parables.

A. Interpret parables according to their central truth

This is the golden rule of interpreting any parable. There may be several truths in a parable, but there is always only *one* central truth in that parable. For example, in the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8, the emphasis is not on the character of the unjust judge but on the persistence of the widow. There is some significance to the judge as representing those who, by his obstinance, force God's people to pray as the widow did. But the central truth is the widow's persistence, not the judge's indifference to her.

Similarly, in the parable of the seed and sower, even though there are several truthful elements that Jesus communicated, there is only one *central* truth: there are four different types of hearts that receive the word of the kingdom—the ignorant and hard heart, the joyful but shallow heart, the distracted and choked heart, and the good and productive heart.

B. Interpreting the parable of the laborers in the landowner's vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16

The importance of interpreting parables according to their context can be seen in the parable of the laborers in the landowner's vineyard (read).

What is the meaning of this parable?

What is the context?

What provoked Jesus to give this parable?

Who is He talking to?

Let's briefly go through this parable. Jesus begins this parable as He did many of His parables with the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is like . . .", so this parable illustrates some truth about God's future kingdom. The NKJV, NASB, NIV have "landowner," ESV has "master," and the KJV, RSV have "householder." The word *oivkodespo,thj* means the master or ruler of a household including its family, servants, animals, goods, and lands. So Jesus is comparing life in the coming kingdom to a master of a household who goes out and employs daily workers in His vineyard.

And here we see—and this is what so many miss when they read this parable—that the landowner signifies Jesus going out into His kingdom recruiting disciples to follow and serve Him. The workers the landowner hires represent Jesus' disciples He has recruited for different lengths of time and service. The payment received by the laborers at the end of the workday represents Jesus rewarding His disciples in the Millennial Kingdom for service rendered to Him in this life. And we need to keep this understanding throughout the parable in order to interpret it properly.

But notice in the parable that the landowner goes out at different times of the day to hire laborers to work in his field until the end of the day.

1. The landowner's hiring, 1-7

a. The landowner goes out early in the morning, 1-2

The phrase "early in the morning" indicates the beginning of the day, which would be 6:00 AM, the Jewish day running from 6 AM to 6 PM. But why did the landowner go out so many times during the day to hire laborers?

It was probably grape-gathering season, which was time-sensitive. The grapes, to be of the most value, had to be harvested at precisely the right time. They had to be fully ripe but also had to be harvested before the latter rains came or they would be ruined. So at precisely the right time the landowner would hire as many workers as possible to gather in his

grapes.

Now there were many landowners but usually not enough workers, so this man hired as many workers as He could at 6:00 AM. Verse 3 tells us he went out into the marketplace where landowners and laborers met to agree on work for the day. The men were day-laborers looking for work, and the marketplace is where they found their work.

This type of labor is very common in agrarian third world countries to this day. The concept is even common in many parts of our own society where day-laborers gather in certain parts of town to be hired by farmers, ranchers, or construction companies. You can find these day-laborers in many Home Depots or Lowes stores to be hired in the morning for a days' work.

But the going rate for a day's work in Jesus' day was a denarius, one day's wage. In our currency it would be about 100.00-150.00 a day.

- b. The landowner goes out about the third hour, 3-4

Here we see the landowner go back to the marketplace about 9:00 AM, hoping to find more workers who had not yet been hired. But notice, there is no bargaining here with these workers as there was with the first workers.

The first workers could be a little firmer in their negotiations, because if a landowner offered too little, they could refuse him and wait for a better offer. But if a worker didn't get hired at the beginning of the day, he wasn't in as strong a negotiating position as the day wore on. And of course the landowner knew this, so the second time he goes to the marketplace there is no negotiating. He just told the workers he will give them what was fair at the end of the day. And the workers, probably, after being passed up at the beginning of the day, agreed to take anything the landowner will give them. So they willingly go to work his vineyard.

- c. The landowner goes out about the sixth and ninth hour, 5

This would be at noon and 3:00 PM. And, again, we see no difference

in the hiring or negotiations. The landowner simply told these workers what he told the 9:00 AM workers that he would give them what was fair at the end of the day.

d. The landowner goes out about the 11th hour, 6-7

This would be about 5:00 PM, one hour before quitting time. The landowner sees more workers standing idle in the marketplace. This doesn't mean they were lazy; it only means they were still waiting for someone to hire them. They were willing to work, but no one hired them yet, so the landowner, still needing to get his crop in, hires even more workers, even though it's the end of the day. And He knows the later he goes and gets workers, the less productive his efforts will be. Those hired at 5:00 PM would hardly make it back to his vineyard to do an hour's work. Yet because he was both compassionate to these workers to give them work, but also in need of getting the work done, he told them to go into his vineyard and he would be fair to them about their pay.

2. The landowner's payment, 8-9

"When evening came." This would be about 6:00 PM when the workday ended. As custom dictated, the steward of the landowner called the workers to receive their pay as it was prescribed by the Mosaic law in Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:14-15. But notice, the steward began paying the workers from the last to the first, not the first to the last. So he began with those who had only worked 1 hour from about 5-6 PM. And amazingly, he gave each of them a denarius, the same amount he promised to give the workers who began at 6 AM.

Now remember, these last workers didn't know what the landowner was going to pay them. They never agreed to a price. He only told them he would give them what was fair. And now they get as much as what the first workers agreed to—a denarius. We can speculate that those who came at 9, noon, and 3 probably received the same wage. But the point of comparison in the parable is the first and the last, not those in between.

3. The landowner's protesters, 10-12

And here we see the jealous spirit of the workers hired first. It's very interesting in this parable that the landowner pays the last first. Think about it. This is really a brilliant parable. If the first to work got paid first, they would not have stayed to see what the others got paid but would have taken their money and immediately left. But by paying them last, they would have to see what the later workers got paid.

And what did they say when they saw the others get the same as they got? Exactly what Jesus expected them to say: "That's unfair!" It says they murmured or grumbled or complained against the landowner. The word means to grumble in a low tone. We would say they were mumbling under their breath at the landowner. In other words, they were furious. How dare he give those who worked less hours the same pay!

But they not only grumbled against the landowner, they were also upset with those who only worked 1 hour and got paid the same as they did. Look at it: "These who are last only worked 1 hour. We worked 12 hours and bore the heat of the day, and you made them equal to us? "We did the heavy lifting and get the same as those who came late and did just a little clean up? We sweated out the heat of the day and get the same as those who came in the cool of the afternoon? It's not fair!"

4. The landowner's response, 13-15

And here we see the landowner deal very graciously but very straightforwardly with those he hired first. And he addresses the spokesman of the group. Notice it says he "answered one of them." And notice, the landowner even calls the man speaking for the rest, "Friend." It's an endearing term. Even though these workers were very upset with the landowner, he has no malice toward them.

He treated them exactly as he said he would. "You consented to a legal agreement, and I've given you your legal wage. The debt is settled according to the agreement we had. I did you no wrong. Why do you accuse me?" And then he asked, "Did you not agree with me for a denarius? And haven't I given you a denarius? What ground, then, is your complaint? Take what is legally yours and go"

And then he tells them that it was his desire, his good pleasure, to give the last man the same as he gave the first. This was entirely his prerogative.

He then asks the man, “Is it not legal for me to do this? Can’t I legally do whatever I want with what is mine?”

And now we can see, if we’re looking for it, what Jesus meant in 19:30, the first will be last, and the last first. Only here in 20:16 He reverses it. Did you see it? In 19:30 the first were last and the last first. Here in 20:16 the last are first and the first last.

So what’s the point of this parable? Who did He tell it to? Why did He tell it? If you’ve followed the context, the reason for the parable is obvious. We can’t miss it: Jesus is comparing Peter and the Twelve to others who also serve Him in His kingdom. Jesus is comparing the workers at 6, 9, 12, 3, and 5 with the disciples. And the spokesman for the first workers who started early in the morning represents Peter speaking for the Twelve who followed Jesus early in His ministry.

So the reason Jesus told this parable was to expose Peter’s and the other disciples’ mercenary, greedy, covetous spirits wanting to be the most privileged and most rewarded in the kingdom.

You say, “Where did you get that?” I got it from the context beginning in 19:16 when a rich young man came to Jesus and asked Him how to inherit eternal life, to which Jesus replied he would have to sell everything he had, give it to the poor, and follow Him. This man wanted to inherit eternal life by the works of the law, so Jesus told him this is what he would have to do to be saved—he would have to be perfect. Jesus wanted the man to see he couldn’t be perfect but needed to throw himself on Jesus’ mercy for salvation.

When the man left, Jesus told the disciples that it was both hard and even impossible for a rich man to enter heaven. But the disciples were so impressed with the rich man’s external holiness, they concluded that if he couldn’t be saved, who could.

Then Peter, speaking for the 12, said to Jesus in verse 27, “Lord, you told the rich man to leave all and follow You. We’ve left all and followed You. What do we get?” And Jesus told Peter and the other disciples that they would sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Also, everyone else who had left everything to follow Jesus would receive a hundredfold and even eternal life. But . . . many who are first will be last, and the last first.

And the first word in 20:1 is “for” F-O-R. It’s an explanatory “for” explaining what Jesus has just said in 19:16-30. At the heart of Peter’s question, “What do we get?” was an attitude of entitlement and superiority. Peter and the others wanted more than everyone else because they served Jesus before and longer than everyone else. And Jesus is showing them it doesn’t work that way. It may work this way in the world, but it doesn’t work this way in Jesus’ kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is like this unusual, gracious, benevolent landowner who out of pure mercy and graciousness gives to His servants whatever He wishes.

And the warning is to Peter and the 12, and to us is, that if you come to Jesus with a legal, jealous, superior spirit, and agree with him for a specific wage, you will get exactly what you agreed to—eternal life. But don’t complain, don’t grumble when He, out of the goodness of his heart gives the same rewards to others who work and sacrifice less than you did, but who served Him with a spirit of gratitude, not a spirit of grumbling and dissatisfaction.

I’m sure this drove a knife into Peter’s and the other disciples’ hearts. Peter, by this point, had to be saying to himself, “Why didn’t I just keep my mouth shut?”

Do you think Peter learned his lesson after this? I wish I could say that he did. When Jesus told Peter in John 21:19 after His resurrection that Peter would one day die for Him, and then told him to follow Him, Peter again wondered about what someone else would get. He said, speaking of John, in verse 21, “But Lord, what about this man?”

Even after Christ’s resurrection, Peter couldn’t let his jealous spirit go. But we’re just like Peter. Maybe our sin isn’t jealousy or superiority, maybe it’s another sin or a host of other sins. We love Christ like Peter did, but we still let the flesh rule in our lives sometimes. We still struggle with the same sins we did when we first got saved.

So what do we do? We go back to the foot of the cross, repent, confess our sins, and God will be faithful and just to forgive us. Praise God he does not mark iniquities. If He did, who would stand?